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ABSTRACT

The major underlying assumptions of the Peer-Centered Coaching Model are that teachers are experts with respect to instruction and, because they believe that they can help each other with classroom problems better than help can be given from other sources, they trust each others' advice. The fundamental element of this coaching model is the use of peer observation in the classroom. A description is given of the process of selecting a peer coach for reciprocal observation and positive feedback. Guidelines are offered on developing a schedule for observation, successful observation techniques, and the format for the feedback session. Included in this model is the concept of the support group, organized to provide a vehicle to help teachers as they continue to improve their instructional effectiveness. The role of the principal in this peer-coaching model is described, as well as the roles of the support group facilitator and group recorder. The format for support group meetings is outlined, and suggestions are given on the development of an agenda for the group, and how the group can provide review and feedback assistance in problem solving. (JD)

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PEER-CENTERED COACHING

TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS TO IMPROVE CLASSROOM PERFORMANCE

A Vehicle of Feedback and Support for Teacher Professional Growth

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PART I: RATIONALE AND INTRODUCTION

What do the following people have in common?: Chris Evert Lloyd... Scott Hamilton... Bruce Jenner... John McEnroe.... Dorothy Hamill... Jack Nicklaus... Yes, they are all athletes. When athletes want to improve a skill where do they go? Do they take a summer course for college credit? Do they go to a seminar to hear the latest techniques about their particular sport? No, at least, not usually. What most of them do is to find themselves a coach, that is another expert - a person who has had similar experiences, successes and failures and who knows "the ropes" - who can give them feedback about what they are currently doing and help them to improve the skills they need to win the particular sport or activity in which they are engaged.

Teachers Are the Experts

The analogy here is that teachers are likewise experts in their field. Everyone accepts them as the "experts" in education and, yet, when asked if they themselves believe that they are the experts, often the answer is a resounding "No!" They frequently look upon the college professor or the consultant or even, perhaps, the administrator, as the experts in education. There can be little doubt, however, that teachers are the "real" experts with respect to instruction. After all, they are the people who are in the classroom every day. They are the ones who focus their energies on "instruction". Others in the field may have more knowledge or information about particular aspects of the education process, but teachers primarily concern themselves with what goes on in the classroom. When teachers are asked what person/role they find most credible in their field, they unanimously reply, "Another teacher" - not the principal, not the college professor, not the consultant. So teachers essentially believe other teachers, when it comes to "instruction". Two major underlying assumtions to the Peer-Centered Coaching Model then, are: 1. Teachers are experts with respect to instruction. 2. A teacher can best be helped by another "expert" - a teacher - because teachers tend to believe teachers when it comes to instruction.

Inservice Day at Lifeline School

Let's take a look at a somewhat typical scenario regarding teacher professional development. On a given "released" day the teachers of Lifeline School are assembled in the school auditorium to take part in another inservice training session. A consultant has been hired by the school administration to tell the teachers some of

the latest innovations and practices that that educational researchers have discovered about the teaching/learning process. The consultant is a good presenter, for a change, - he tells a few new jokes and is generally pleasant and warm to the audience - and the staff does "enjoy" his remarks, even though some are heard to comment about the length of time they have been sitting in those "uncomfortable folding chairs". A number of the staff discuss at the "break" some of the ideas that the consultant has talked about and a few agree that the information might be useful. Following the presentation, the staff applauds his efforts while some express relief that the "inservice" is over for this quarter of the year. A few teachers decide to try out some of the practices the consultant discussed in his presentation. After the first few days following the inservice session, three of the original seven teachers who thought they might like to try some things, are still attempting a few new practices in their classrooms. The other four have joined the majority of the teachers who, while they might have some interest in what the consultant suggested, are more "realistic" and realize that they will not get the support they think they need, nor the resources, nor the reinforcement to continue trying to implment the new practices. Besides, they know from past experience that, while they might get excited when they hear a new idea in the beginning, given time, their enthusiasm will wane. After the first two weeks, there is little or no evidence of any of the new practices being used by the staff, for even the three stalwarts got "tired" and gave up. Oh, well, so much for the value of that inservice program.

"Hot Bath" Phenomenon

We might refer to this type of inservice as a "hot bath". You know, you get excited and enthused when you first hear all those wonderful ideas - that's the "hot bath". You rush back to your classroom just bubbling over with enthusiasm and resolve to really meet the needs of those kids. You try out a few things that you heard. They "don't work!" "I'll try again." "I wish I could find someone to help me with this idea." It still doesn't "work". "Oh, well, this always happens ... maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all." We might refer to this as the "cold shower" phenomenon. Why does it occur? Assume for the moment that the knowledge presented by the consultant in this example was, in fact, appropriate and the classroom practices associated with this knowledge useful for the teacher with respect to changing student behavior in a positive way, i.e., increasing student performance; decreasing undesirable behavior, etc. Why, then, don't many teachers who heard what the consultant had to say, try the new practices in the classroom? Why don't those who do try them continue to do so over time?

Inservice education for teachers is often seen as the one-day presentation of new ideas by some outside expert who is invited, usually by the principal, to address the staff during an "inservice" day or by attendance at randomly selected conferences and seminars which may or may not meet any goals of the teacher with respect to professional growth. The assumption underlying

such "training" is that once the knowledge of the new strategy or practice is presented to teachers, they will, in fact, utilize these new strategies and practices in their classrooms. Nothing could be further from the truth! Immediately following a such a workshop or seminar presentation, a few of the "new" ideas may be in evidence in the classroom. In most instances, however, the new practices disappear quickly with the passage of time. It is unlikely that even within two or three weeks following the initial introduction of the "new" strategies, that one can discern changes in the teacher's behavior in the classroom that can be attributed to the new practices.

How Change Occurs in the Classroom

If just the presentation of knowledge does not activate a change on the part of the teacher in the classroom, what, then, will motivate such change? Basically, we know that the first step toward making any change is a recognition or awareness on the part of an individual that the new knowledge, practice or skill will, in fact, satisfy a need or desire the individual has. The notion that just because I tell you something that I believe to be important will somehow change your behavior is nonsense. Rather, if what I tell you is perceived by you as meeting some need you have, then, perhaps, you will consider making a change in that direction.

A second basic tenet with respect to change is that we need feedback in order to recognize a starting point from which to move toward the new behavior, as well as to provide knowledge that we are, in fact, moving toward that goal. When we receive feedback that we are moving in the "right" direction, this feedback, in itself, tends to motivate us to continue the new behavior. In other words, the new behavior is reinforced. In addition, feedback provides us with information which allows us to adjust our daily practices so that they are consistent with the desired behavior.

A third underlying assumption about change is that support from others with respect to the new behavior will reinforce that behavior and will further motivate us to continue to move in the direction of the new behavior. The more support we receive from others for what we are doing, the more likely we will continue to do it!

To illustrate these assumptions about the change process, let us examine the situation of a teacher who has learned by examining the effective schools' research that a particular practice of interacting with students will work better than another. The teacher decides that perhaps this new idea will help him to be a "better" teacher. Perhaps, he or she asks another teacher to observe what he is presently doing in this regard and provide him with feedback based on that observation. He then decides a new course of action modeled after the research practice that he learned about. As he tries out the new practice, he asks for and receives feedback that he is, in fact, behaving in a manner

consistent with what the research says. In addition, he joins with a group of six or seven other teachers who are likewise interested in interacting with students in the best possible way. The group discusses their successes and failures in this regard and shares other strategies which might improve their effectiveness in working with students. As the teacher uses the new practices and is reinforced and helped by his colleagues, the new behavior becomes part of his routine classroom repertoire.

No vehicle exists in most schools that allows these notions of growth and change to flourish. The inadequacy of budgets for development of professional staff, the lack of time available within the school day to foster support and collaboration among staff members, inadequacy of knowledge with respect to the change process, traditional mistrust between teachers and administrators, as well as a host of other variables, makes the task of improvement and increased teacher effectiveness a most difficult goal to accomplish.

Peer-Centered Coaching - A Vehicle for Professional Growth

During the last decade a number of educational researchers have examined various training variables to determine which specific characteristics of the training process have more impact than others with respect to acquisition of new knowledge and skills and the application of this knowledge and skills by the teacher in the classroom. In addition, others have examined the change process to determine the variables that can be attributed to sustaining the change brought on by the practice of the new knowledges and skills. Characteristics from these two areas - training and change process - have been integrated with characteristics drawn from the science of human behavioral change to create a model for teacher professional growth and development which can be described as a "coaching" model.. The term "coaching" is a generic term used to describe a process vehicle for promoting improvement of individual skills and thus increased effectiveness. Within the framework of this particular model, coaching can be defined as a process through which teachers receive and give feedback in a supportive environment for the purpose of altering their ways of teaching and interacting with students in the classroom.

While much of the previous discussion has focused upon the need for a "process" that is consistent with what is known about sustaining change, it is imperative that the new practices or skills that teachers are implementing in the classroom be likewise consistent with what the research tells us about instructional effectiveness. If we know, for example, that specific grouping techniques work better than others - i.e., have greater chance of increasing student performance - than it only makes sense that these are the techniques we want to focus upon and practice in the classroom. If the research tells us that there are instructional practices that will increase the success rate of students, we want to know the degree to which these practices exist in our classroom and, thus, the degree to which we need to change our behavior to

be consistent with "effectiveness". The Peer-Centered Coaching Model, then, simply becomes a process vehicle for ensuring that the appropriate behaviors are being practiced by the teacher in the classroom.

By bringing together a process to ensure long-term change and improvement in the classroom with the best of what the research says about effective instructional practice, we can hope for on-going professional development for teachers that does, in fact, impact positively on the performance of students.

The Peer-Centered Coaching Model

Some of the assumptions underlying the Peer-Centered Coaching Model have already been discussed. Let us restate those previously discussed and make note here of other assumptions upon which the Model is based:

1. Teachers are the primary experts in providing instruction.

2. Teachers believe other teachers with respect to instructional improvement; they are most credible with one another.

3. Teachers are the best source of help for each other in terms of increasing effectiveness as classroom instructors; the Peer-Centered Coaching Model is a teacher-initiated, teacher-directed model for teacher professional growth.

4. We are motivated to change when we believe that something we do will satisfy a need or desire WE have.

5. Feedback is necessary to change, since it allows us to recognize a starting point from which to change and it allows us to adjust our behavior as we move toward the desired outcome.

6. The more support we receive from others for what we are doing, the more likely we will continue to do it.

7. Change and instructional improvement best takes place in an environment of mutual trust.

8. There are a known body of characteristics that the research tells us are more effective than others in increasing student achievement and performance; certain specific classroom practices "work" better than others.

9. The educational leaders have a set of specific functions that are performed as part of the Peer-Centered Coaching Model. The role of the principal(s) is critical to the success of any model of improvement for teachers.

The Peer-Centered Coaching Model has two major components, namely: Peer Observation and Support. Both components have been found to be vital to the overall success of the Model.

PART 2: PEER OBSERVATION

Most teachers operate in a "feedback vacuum" which hinders their professional growth. Because of lack of time, school schedules, mistrust, and other factors, teachers often spend little time, with the possible exception of the lunch break in the lounge, interacting with other teachers, sharing ideas and practices and giving and receiving help. Watching a colleague teach can be a valuable experience for both the teacher being observed and the observer.

A few guidelines will help to get the process off to a smooth start:

1. Team up with somebody you like and/or respect. The process depends upon credibility and trust.

2. Maintain a non-judgmental, non-evaluative posture when giving and receiving feedback. Remember: We only make change when we are motivated by some need or desire WE have.

3. Use the opportunity to develop a "trust partner" - one with which you can feel free to brainstorm new ideas, challenge old ones, reveal frustrations and failures, as well as successes, and generally be more vulnerable than, perhaps, you feel you usually are able.

4. Expect support and encouragement from your principal. Seek his/her help in setting up your peer observation schedule. Avail yourself of his/her expertise, when appropriate. Remember: Your principal supports this program and has expressed his/her availability to help you to make it work.

The Process

1. Teachers form groups of two or three. While the two-person team seems to work best, there may be situations where three teachers are able to more easily schedule their observations. This team will remain as a group for at least the first six to eight observations. After that, teachers may choose to team up for the Peer Observations on an ad hoc basis, dependent upon the specific practices to be observed, the availability of the observation partner, etc. Teachers often form their groups on the basis of similar grade levels or subject areas, but this is not necessary. The essential ingredient in the Peer Observation process is the giving and receiving of specific feedback in a safe and trusting environment. In some school districts where the

Model has been in place for some time, elementary teachers are observing secondary teachers and vice versa.

2. The two teachers develop an observation schedule with the assistance, if needed, of the principal. The length of time for each observation will vary, dependent upon the specific practices being observed. For example, a teacher may ask his/her peer observation team member to record how quickly the students in a particular Reading group begin to work on an assigned task when the teacher moves to a second group. This might require the observer's presence in the classroom for only a few minutes to observe that specific activity. In another instance, a teacher may want to find out if he or she is allowing opportunities for all students to answer teacher-directed questions. This may require an observer being present for a longer period of time. The average length of time, however, seems to be about 20 - 30 minutes.

A further consideration may be the time away by the observer from his or her own classroom. Obviously, while the observer is in another teacher's classroom, the observer either must be freed through the scheduling process or someone must be availble to be with those students during the observer teacher's absence. It may be necessary to provide classroom coverage for one of the teachers. The principal can assist in this situation. In some instances, he/she might personally provide the coverage. In other situations, if the present school schedule cannot accomodate such observations, a change in the overall schedule may be necessary. A number of schools accomodate the process by providing substitute teachers on a scheduled basis to provide the coverage. In some schools, manipulation of the itinerant support personnel schedules have permitted more flexibility. In any case, it is the responsibility of the principal to assist in making the observations possible. The commitment regarding this issue must be sought from and received by the principal - and in some instances, the school district - prior to the initiation of the Peer Observation training.

3. The team meets prior to the actual observation to determine who will observe who, and specifically what practices will be observed. While the first observation or two may be made with little or no focus on specific practices in order to allow the participants more comfort with having another teacher in their room, the observatiuon and feedback of specific classroom practices are a key to the growth and development of the teachers involved. As the training process continues, specific classroom practices associated with the instructional effectiveness research will be presented. These research-based practices, which are tied to increased student performance, will provide the basic content for the peer observations.

In most instances, it has been discovered that the optimum location for the observer is at the back of the room. This will

vary, obviously, dependent upon the type of activity to be observed and needs to be discussed by the parties prior to the observation session. Other information such as how long the observation will be, what type of lesson will be going on, etc. may need to be discussed in advance of the actual observation. It is recommended that the "Peer Observation Planning Sheet" be used, particularly at the beginnning of the Coaching program.

4. The observer takes anecdotal notes during the observation in the classroom. (See "Peer Observation Planning Sheet") These notes relate ONLY to those specific practices that were previously discussed by the two teachers. It is important to quantify, as much as possible, the observed behaviors. Remember: This is an objective reporting of what you see and only regarding practices you were asked to provide feedback about. The notes are strictly non-judgemental and are confined to what was objectively observed. (Note: We only make changes when WE believe that what we are hearing makes sense for US. By making no judgemental statements, we allow the teacher being observed to make his/her own conclusions based on his/her own "reality" of the situation.)

5. Following the observation, the two teachers meet to share what was observed. This meeting should take place as close to the period of observation as possible, at least during the same day. Usually this meeting requires very little time since it is essentially a feedback session. The average length of time for this session seems to be about ten minutes, although some teams use this "sharing" time for more in-depth discussion, which will obviously require more time. It is more important, however, that the meeting take place as soon as possible, even if this means just taking five minutes at lunch.

The format for the feedback session is as follows:

a. The observer objectively reports on what he/she observed, stating what was observed as specifically as possible, quantifying the behaviors, wherever applicable, i.e., "When you moved to the second Reading group, I observed that three of the eight students appeared to be on task within the first two minutes. The others in the group appeared to all be on task within the next minute with the exception of one student who really never seemed to get going on the assignment." or, "I noticed that when you asked the question about the causes of the Civil War of the whole class, five students immediately raised their hands. You called on one of them just as ten or twelve other students began to respond."

b. The teacher then does a self-critique with respect to the specific behaviors that were reported by the observer. For example, "I might have remained with the first Reading group for a minute or two after giving instructions on the assignment instead of moving on so quickly to the second group" or, "What I think I will try next time I ask a

P E E R O B S E R V A T I O N P L A N N I N G S H E E T

Teacher ..... Observer .....

Date of Observation ..... Time of Observation .....

Date of Feedback Session ..... Time of FB Session .....

Type of Lesson: ___ Review ___ New Lesson ___ Test ___ Practice

Other: (Explain)

What arrangements have been made for observer's class to be covered?

.....

Specific Practice(s) to be observed:

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Observer's Notes: (Be specific, quantifying the behavior observed)

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AHD:1984

question of the class is not to respond to volunteers, but rather call upon students at random. This will allow every student an equal opportunity to answer the question."

c. The two teachers share any experiences, ideas or techniques that might be tried to bring about the desired change. Again, NO judgements. Avoid "You should... Try saying, "I tried..." or, "I think this might work for ME in a similar situation".

Outline of Steps - Peer Observation

1. Select Peer Observation partner.

2. Meet prior to actual observation to determine specific practices to be observed, when, how long, etc. - Use Peer Observation Planning Sheet.

3. Observer takes notes in classroom. Be objective - quantify behaviors. Make observations ONLY about those practices previously agreed upon.

4. Conduct post-observation meeting. Report objectively on what was observed. Teacher does self-critique. Two teachers share experiences, ideas, techniques that may help. Make no judgements!

PART 3: THE SUPPORT GROUP

You have a really "bad" day in the classroom. You know that if you had chosen to stay home instead of teaching this day, twenty-five students would have benefited. Nothing seemed to go right with your teaching. The day was a plain disaster! Every teacher has probably experienced this feeling occasionally. Where do you look for support after such a day? Who do you talk to? Do you run in and tell the principal that you had such a terrible day that you want him to deduct a day's pay from your check? Or, perhaps, you call the parents of the students in your class to tell them that you did a rotten job of teaching their children today. Of course not, if you choose to tell anyone, it is probably another teacher. Why? Quite simply, you know that another teacher will understand and, in all likelihood, will not "judge" you because you had a "bad" day. This "support" from a colleague we can trust often helps us to regain a broader perspective and generally helps us to feel less alone. In addition, the notion of "support" can be a powerful vehicle for teachers to help one another to improve their teaching effectiveness.

Purposes of the Support Group

The primary purpose of the Support Group in the context of the Peer-Centered Coaching Model then, is to provide a vehicle of

support to help teachers as they continue to improve their instructional effectiveness. "The more support we receive from others for what we are doing, the more likely we will continue to do it!" The Support Group offers its members three kinds of help:

1. Professional Stimulation: The Support Group provides opportunities for teachers to gain new information, awareness and insights related to their professional development. New and innovative ideas, as well as traditional notions, can be challenged within the safe environment of the Support Group.

2. Practical Help: The members of the Support Group can help each other learn about new methods, practice new skills, solve problems, exchange suggestions and, generally help one another in the day-to-day routines of teaching.

3. Support: One of the primary outcomes of the Support Group is that members feel less alone. The Group serves as a vehicle for sharing success and encouragement, as well as failure and frustration in a friendly, safe and trusting environment.

Support Group Membership

The Groups are comprised of teachers who have a common desire to improve their classroom effectiveness, as well as the desire to give and receive feedback. Usually a Support Group is made up of 3 or 4 Peer Observation teams. The ideal number of teachers in the Support Group seems to be about eight. Four Peer Observation teams of two (or sometimes three) teachers each, often join together to form a Support Group. For example, in a school with a staff of 25 teachers, there might be three Support Groups formed. While Groups often tend to form based on similar grade level or subject area because of convenience of getting together, this is not necessary. When the Coaching Model is first being developed in a school, it is advantageous for all teachers to participate. After all, one cannot really determine the worth of a program until he/she has tried it prsonally. After a given period of time following the initiation of the program, teachers should be allowed to opt out of the program, if they desire. The real test of the success of the program is seen wherein teachers want to remain as part of the Coaching progam because they view it as an essential part of their professional development and they are able to see positive changes in their own classroom behavior and that of their students as a result of the program.

The Support Group needs to meet frequently. Once every other week is recommended, particularly at the beginning of the Coaching process. Groups usually meet for about thirty-five to forty-five minutes, during a pre-arranged time. Many Support Groups meet after the regular school day. Some meet before school in the morning, while others are able to arrange schedules so that they can meet during the school day. In all instances, the assistance of the principal is needed to ensure that time can be found to conduct the Support Group meeting. Since "finding the time" is

often a major problem to the success of the Coaching process, these issues need to be worked out in advance of the beginning of the program among teachers and administrators. A number of innovative ways have been found to provide time for Support Group meetings in some of the schools currently using the process. Some Support Groups have found ways to have lunch together, once every couple of weeks. Other schools have employed substitute teachers to provide coverage; while others have rearranged the support personnel schedules to make the program work. Some schools use parent volunteers for teacher coverage. In one particular school in rural South Dakota, on a given day each month, parents actually "take over" the classes and activities of the school for the day under the direction of the principal. Not only are the objectives of the Coaching program met, but the "parent involvement" goals of the school are likewise enhanced! It is clear, however, that a commitment of the principal and other administrators is essential to the success of the program.

Role of the Principal

The principal is crucial to the success of the Support Groups. It is obvious from the previous discussion of his/her role in the scheduling and "time" issue. In addition, the principal is responsible for making known to all staff how important he/she views the implemenation of the Coaching Model, both the Peer Observation component and the Support Groups. The principal assists the teachers to schedule both the Peer Observations and the Support Groups. He/she generally lets everyone know of his/her high expectations for the program and actively supports and encourages the staff in their Coaching activities. The principal agrees to hold the time of the Support Group meetings inviolate and agrees not to use any of the Support Group scheduled time for administrative-type issues. A component of the training program for implementing the Peer-Centered Coaching Model is the Leadership Mapping Program (LMP). The LMP combines effective leadership practices drawn from the effective schools' literature and current social behavior research. Principals and other District administrators involved in the program create an individual leadership development plan based on the research practices and their own leadership profile. The program assists them to improve their individual leadership effectiveness.

Support Group Meeting Roles

The Support Group should be viewed by the teachers as a useful vehicle for professional growth, rather than as another way to take up their time; to add to their already over-burdened schedules. To avoid "runaway" sessions and keep the meeting on task, certain specific roles are taken by various members of the Group during the meeting.

The Facilitator

A Facilitator conducts the business of the meeting. In fact, all of the group members assist the process of the movement of the

meeting by acting as facilitators for the group process. Part of the Peer-Centered Model training deals directly with this skill of group facilitation. Usually, however, one person agrees to be the chief Facilitator for the Group. This role may rotate among the members or, if the Group and the present Facilitator are comfortable with the role, he/she may simply continue until someone else would like the job. Often what happens is that a particular individual does an effective job of conducting the meetings and the Group simply asks that person to remain in the role. The Facilitator is responsible for starting the meeting on time and ending the meeting on time, as well as keeping the meeting on task. The issues of staying on task and being "on time" are, perhaps, the two factors that contribute most to the breakdown of meetings. When an individual is concerned about what he/she "ought to be doing" instead of what is going on in the meeting, that person is not a contributing member of the group, so meetings should not be extended unless arrangements have been made prior to the meeting date. In addition, if meetings continue to move off task or become simply social outings, soon members will be finding excuses for not attending.

The Group Recorder

The Group Recorder is responsible for keeping a "group memory" of pertinent content of the meeting. Unlike the "minutes" in a traditional meeting, the group memory is taken on large sheets of newsprint or the like and is recorded with a large marker or crayon so that all can view the "memory" as it is being written. The Group Recorder simply takes notes of the important issues discussed at the meeting. If any Group member differs with what is being written, it can be changed immediately at the time it is observed. Since "Robert's Rules" or the like are not used, a change is simply made without fanfare. The newsprint "memory" is brought to the next Group meeting and is displayed for all to see. It is essentially up to the Group as to the detail desired on the "memory". This needs to be decided at a Group "rule-setting" sesion at one of the early meetings of the Group. The Peer-Centered Coaching training program helps members develop and practice skills for both group facilitation and recording.

As in the case of the Facilitator, the Group recorder role may rotate among the Group members or may remain with one or two individuals. During the actual Support Group meeting, the Facilitator and the Group Recorder often switch roles when one or the other chooses to become so intensely involved with the discussion that he/she is not able to perform his/her role adequately.

The Support Group Meeting Format

The meeting format includes four basic phases:

1. Development of the agenda

2. Review and feedback about the previous meeting

3. Problem-solving

4. Closure

Development of the Agenda

Once the meeting has been called to order, the Facilitator requests agenda items from the members of the Group. The items are usually in the form of some problem or issue being faced by the teacher in the classroom. Since the FOCUS Coaching Model's objective is "classroom instructional effectiveness", the issues discussed during the Support Group meeting are usually classroom oriented. Often the problem or issue is related to a technique or practice that a teacher has been trying to improve and perhaps has been the focus of observations with his/her Peer Observation team member.

The agenda item is stated in simple, behavioral terms. No elaboration is necessary at this time. The teacher providing the agenda item also estimates the amount of time he/she thinks will be required by the Group to "handle" the problem. For example, "I know that when I move from one Reading group to the second, the first group does not seem to get working on the assigned task immediately. I'm not sure what I might do so that they get started working right away. I think this will take about 15 minutes of the Group's time". Since most Support Group meeting are no longer than forty-five minutes in length, only one or two problems or issues will be handled. The purpose for requesting a certain amount of time is that this helps the Group to establish some Group norms around time. It is not expected that by stating an estimated time that this must be "held to" during discussion of that item. Again, rather, this is a way for the Group to begin to establish some norms for itself. The Group Recorder lists the possible agenda items as stated, in note form, with the amount of time requested and the person's name.

After all the items have been posted on the group memory, the Facilitator asks the Group to prioritize the proposed items to determine which items will be discussed at this meeting. In almost no case will there be enough time during a single meeting to discuss all of the agenda items. The purpose of the prioritizing session is to try to help the teachers who are most in need of help at this meeting. During the training session, the teachers are provided with and practice some techniques for prioritizing and for determining who has the greatest need. Such techniques as "asking for what you want", using "I" statements, etc. are practiced in the training. For example, "I would like help from the Group during this meeting because I am meeting with the parents of this student to discuss this issue next week and so I need to get some help now!" It is important that even though an issue may not be handled by the Group because of lack of time or low priority, the person providing the issue was "heard". In many instances, mmembers whose problems were not handled at the meeting, find that other Group members offer their support and assistance following

the meeting time. The process of agenda development allows each member an opportunity to ask for help from the Group and to create an investment in the agenda items. The entire process, after practice, usually requires no more than five minutes. By the way, items that are not handled by the Group during this meeting are not placed automatically on the next agenda. If the issue is still considered important by a member and it wasn't handled at this meeting, the teacher must again go through the same process at the next meeting.

Here are the steps in outline form for the Development of the Agenda:

1. Members state agenda items briefly and request approximate time needed to discuss item.

2. Group Recorder lists items and times as stated.

3. Group prioritizes agenda items.

4. Group Recorder rewrites prioritized items.

Review and Feedback

The Facilitator draws the group's attention to the group memory from the previous meeting. The teacher(s) who was the object of the previous meeting's problem-solving activity reviews what actions he/she has taken to remedy the problem and what progress has been made since the last meeting. (During the "Closure" portion of the previous meeting, the teacher(s) whose problem or issue was discussed by the Group made a verbal commitment to the Group to try some action and report back to the Group - See "Closure") For example, "I tried remaining with the first Reading group for a few minutes after I gave them their assignment to make sure they were all "on task" before moving onto the second group. All but two of that reading group is now finishing their assignment by the end of the class period, so it is getting better than it was."

The teacher may seek additional feedback fronm the Group at this time or the Group may ask the teacher clarification questions about the actions the teacher has been taking. If the teacher feels that no progress toward solving the problem has been noted after he/she tried some new actions, a request for the item to be placed on the agenda again would have been made during the "agenda development" portion of the meeting. The entire "review and feedback" phase of the meeting should not take more than ten or twelve minutes once a Support Group has been functioning for a period of time.

Problem-solving

The Facilitator calls upon the teacher whose agenda item was listed as the first priority. The teachers states his/her problem/issue as briefly as possible, using measurable and quantifiable trems to describe the behavior or practice, if possible. For example, "When

I ask the class a question, I find that I almost always respond to the student who raises his hand first. I asked Betty, my Peer Observer team member, to come into my class and watch what happened. She noticed that this happens almost every time I ask a question of the class. I just can't seem to react fast enough to stop myself and what I found out is that I'm calling on the same few students every time." Other teachers in the Group may ask clarification questions ONLY, at this time, but are not to give any advice or make any judgements. For example, "Does this seem to happen in one class more than in others?" or "Are these students that raise their hands and that you call on, the 'better' students in the class?" Avoid questions that are really suggest advice or make judements, i.e., "Are you afraid to call upon the "slower" students because they might give you the wrong answer?" or, in another instance, "Do you give your students the same respect you expect from them?"

The Facilitator now asks the other Group members, "What have YOU tried that has worked for YOU in a similar situation?" The way this is stated is really a key to the success of the group process. Note, that the members are being asked to relate something that has worked for THEM, not something they think "should" work for the person requesting the help. (Remember that each of us makes a change because we believe what we see or hear may work for US, that is, it satisfies a need or desire WE have. Essentially, we can listen to what has worked for others and think that perhaps that may work for us, too. The point is : Never give advice or make judgements! We are really are own "experts" and the answers lie within us. The Group may help us to actualize something within us or help us to have an insight about something we already know. This way of expressing ourselves, although somewhat awkward, at first, will ensure a judgement-free process and allow for trust, creativity and openess in our interactions with the Support Group members.)

Group members now share experience or solutions that have worked for them. For example, "I had a similar situation once in my third grade class. I tried .... This really made a difference for me." or "Last year when I taught American History, I had some students who were always waving their hands before I even finished asking the question. What I did was use a deck of student name cards which I would shuffle at the beginning of each class. I would then turn over a card and read the student's name. I would then ask the question and quickly call upon that student to answer the question. After a while, the class got the idea and stopped waving their hands."

At this point, if no one in the Group has any personal experiences to relate, someone in the Group, or the Facilitator, may request a departure from the rules. This simply allows the Group to brainstorm some ideas. Everyone in the Group is clear, however, that these ideas and techniques may or may not have been tried. Usually, no more than three or four minutes should be devoted to brainstorming any one topic.

The Facilitator now solicits from the Group "what the research" says about this particular practice or behavior. This is done so that the member being helped can compare what he/she has heard from the other Group members with respect to any research-based practices with which the Group may be familiar. The FOCUS training program emphacizes "research-based" practices, as well as teacher experience.

The training program includes role playing situations so that members can practice interacting with one another in a non-judgemental, non-evaluative manner. This is, perhaps, one of the most difficult behaviors to implement, since for many of us, it is not the usual way we express ourselves.

The steps in the Problem-solving phase of the meeting are as follows:

1. Teacher states the problem/issue briefly in observable terms.

2. Group members ask clarification questions so that a clear understanding of the problem evolves.

3. Facilitator asks of the Group, "What have you tried that has worked for you in similar situations?"

4. Group members share their own experiences in similar situations.

5. Group may decide to brainstorm ideas and techniques.

6. Group members offer examples of practices drawn from the research.

Closure

Following the problem-solving discussion, the Facilitator asks the teacher who requested help what techniques or ideas he/she might try to remedy the problem situation, i.e., "The Group has shared some techniques and ideas that have worked for them in similar situations (or, "We have brainstormed some ideas.") and you have heard what the research has to say. What do you think you might like to try?" The teacher makes his/her own conclusions about the actions he/she will take. It may be that the teacher will actually choose a few ideas that others have tried successfully and/or are research-based practices; it is just as likely that the teacher will select some action(s) that was not specifically presented by the Group, but, rather was "triggered" as a result of the Group discussion.

Once the teacher has stated what he/she intends to try, the Facilitator asks the teacher to make a commitment to the Group to report back at the next meeting of the Support Group. (See: "Review and Feedback") It is important that the teacher actually state what he/she will do and that he/she agrees to report back to the

Group. This constitutes the verbal contract with the Group. It provides a degree of accountability, as well as allows the Group to receive reinforcement that they did, in fact, help a member of the Group.

An outline of the steps of the "Closure" phase of the Support Group meeting follows:

1. Facilitator asks teacher what action he/she will take based upon the Group discussion.

2. The teacher states what techniques or ideas he/she will try to remedy the problem situation in the classroom. Draws his/her onw conclusions.

3. Teacher makes verbal commitment to the Group to report back at next meeting.

The process now begins all over again with the next item from the prioritized agenda. When Groups are in their initial stages of forming, one or perhaps two problems or issues can be handled at a meeting.. As Groups mature, however, it is not unusual to deal with three or four problems or issues. Regardless of the number of problems discussed, it is important that the Group adjourn at the agreed-upon time.

In the beginning when Support Groups form, there is a degree of group team-building that is necessary. "How much can I trust this group?" "Will they laugh at me if I make a mistake?" "Are they evaluating me as a teacher?" "Will I really get any help from them?" These are the types of questions and concerns that are typical in new groups and the FOCUS Model training program addresses these issues and works through a set of group activities to help teachers feel more comfortable and productive as members of their Group. The expressed purpose of the Support Group is to help teachers improve their instructional effectiveness and to accomplish this in a safe and supportive environment. It takes time and effort to build this "safe and supportive environment" and it is actually possible to measure quantifiably how far a group has progressed toward this goal. The final test of the impact of the Support Group is when its members feel that the meetings of the Group provide them with something that will personally affect their own growth.. The Support Group is then operating under its own inertia!

For further information, names of contact school districts, training services and materials available and associated costs, please contact:

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